

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PORT HEDLAND
THURSDAY, 10 AUGUST 2006**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Ms K. Hodson-Thomas (Acting Chiarmman)
Mr S.R. Hill**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mrs J. Hughes**

Hearing commenced at 10.18 am**PRICE, MR VAUGHAN KEVIN****Captain, South Hedland Fire and Rescue Service, examined:**

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Welcome. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Price: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Price: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Price: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: When was the South Hedland Fire and Rescue Service Brigade established, how many members does it have and what emergency services role does it perform?

Mr Price: It was established about 37 years ago and has about 25 active members, but that varies from time to time. Being a transient town, our numbers go up and down quite a bit. We look after fire and rescue in South Hedland and Port Hedland. Another brigade is in town that we work with. We deal with road accident rescues, hazardous substance or hazardous chemical spills and any residential fires and bushfires within the town boundary. Our brigade does not have a bushfire role. Port Hedland has a bushfire role; it looks after the extremities of the town. We basically cover the road halfway to Karratha, halfway to Marble Bar, halfway to Newman and halfway to Broome. It is quite an area to cover for road rescue.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Are you involved in storms and flooding?

Mr Price: To a degree. The SES covers the bigger portion of that role, but we do assist if required. In the past we have been asked to help out. SES takes the first role and we fill in where required.

Mr S.R. HILL: What is the average age of your 25 members?

Mr Price: The average age is 40; it is quite a young crew. A number of more experienced, older people are members, who have been around for a number of years. We have three or four people aged between 50 and 60, a few in their 40s and a few in their mid to late 20s.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: What other brigades or emergency service units does your brigade interact with and how does this interaction occur; for example, do you work on incidents together or have joint training?

Mr Price: We are very close to the Port Hedland fire and rescue, which runs the same service as our service. The SES is in town. We have sea search and rescue, St John Ambulance and the police service. When we work with St John Ambulance and the police service, we mainly work at incidents. An interagency training exercise is coming up the week after next in which all services are involved, including the hospital. It will be carried out at the airport as an aircraft exercise. That is normally run every year. Generally we train with our own brigade but we try to do a bit of training with Port Hedland because it runs the same role as we do. A lot of our training is done between both brigades. Other brigades come in. Members from Karratha and Newman are sent to train with us and we travel down there from time to time.

Mr S.R. HILL: A number of local governments are proposing that FESA take over part or all of the local government bushfire responsibility. These responsibilities include those relating to supporting and administering bushfire brigades. FESA has suggested that the legislation allow FESA to take over bushfire responsibilities but only when the local government in the respective area wants this to occur. Does the brigade have a comment on that?

Mr Price: In some ways it has its advantages. One of our major issues at the moment is that a lot of paperwork is involved. Being all volunteers, a lot of time has to be committed not just to paperwork but also training. If FESA takes over that role, it needs to get the right balance and put support officers in place to handle the office and the training side of it to run all those roles so the volunteers are left to do what they enjoy doing, which is going to jobs.

Mr S.R. HILL: You have a person who carries out the administration side of things. Do you think FESA should provide more support for people like that?

Mr Price: Yes, or have its own people do that. We have our own secretary who does that and who is a volunteer. It is a huge workload. People like her put in more hours on paperwork than all of us. The general feeling of the brigade is that, if FESA looks at taking over that role, over time, we would like to see FESA handle the administrative side. One of the biggest issues is the workload that comes back to the volunteers. A huge amount of responsibility and workload is put back onto the volunteer, which in turn affects our members. We try to encourage members to come along but they say, "This is pretty hard work. There is a lot of work involved." People put a big value on their personal life these days. Generally, I cannot see a big issue with that. It has to be all one way. If local government is prepared to let it go in some areas but not others, there would be two sets of rules and it could get confusing and conflicting. We would probably want to keep it all in line.

Mr S.R. HILL: I think that is pretty common right across the state.

Mr Price: Yes. That makes sense.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Currently the legislation empowers three bodies - FESA, local government and CALM - to have control of fire at any given time. Control of fire is dependant on land tenure. The Auditor General and the coroner have both criticised this arrangement, claiming that one body must be made accountable and responsible for the control of fire during a multi-agency incident. Both claim that anything less jeopardises the safety of the community of Western Australia. CALM is agreeable to FESA assuming control from local government but not from CALM. Do you have a view on this?

Mr Price: It is important that one body has control. I have some background in bushfires and CALM. It always got to the point where if a fire was within a certain distance of CALM land or threatening CALM land, it would take over, which from our perspective as volunteers was great because we could handball it. CALM people are professionals and they know what they are doing. It is pretty hard because there is so much at stake. When we fight a bushfire, we put a dollar value on it. When we go into state forests where there is a dollar value to the government, we look at it in two different ways. I do not know enough about it to comment. There definitely is an issue there and generally one agency needs to be responsible because, if an issue does arise, who is accountable at the end of the day? Where there are interagencies, there is the opportunity to pass the buck and that can be eliminated by one agency being responsible.

Mr S.R. HILL: Currently Western Australia uses the fire districts and emergency services levy category areas to define emergency service delivery areas. FESA has indicated that a system with two overlapping boundaries is slightly confusing. It is asking that we remove the two separate boundaries and instead establish one single boundary to be used for everything. If we were to do this, fire districts and emergency services levy boundaries would be dissolved and the emergency service areas would be established. The United Firefighters Union has claimed that this is an attack on the identity of the fire service. Do you have a comment on that?

[10.29 am]

Mr Price: Getting rid of grey areas and putting one border in is obviously important and would save a lot of confusion. I agree with losing the image of fire and rescue. I feel pretty strongly about that. There was a big push to go along with FESA for everything. It would bring different groups of people under one banner. In town, for instance, you have the SES. They are committed to their state emergency service. You have got the fire and rescue service. They are committed to their service. Bush fire - the same. That identity thing is a big icon. I personally feel - and it is the general feeling of the brigade - that we are fire and rescue service and that is the way we want to stay. Basically, we need the "fire". The name needs to be there.

Mr S.R. HILL: So it would be a concern if we just had an emergency services department or something like that?

Mr Price: Yes. You lose your identity.

Mr S.R. HILL: You are keen, therefore, to keep the word "fire"?

Mr Price: For sure, yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: The committee has received numerous submissions requesting that state government be bound by the same fire prevention legislation as private landowners. For instance, where private property owners are compelled to install firebreaks, state government would be compelled to do the same on crown land. Currently state government is exempt from having to install firebreaks on crown land. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr Price: I think it should be one law for everybody. If the farmers have to do it, so has the government. I have no queries there; that is pretty definite.

Mr S.R. HILL: Particularly with the Port Hedland port, do you have any comments on heavy industry emergency preparedness in your region? Some stakeholders have argued that the lack of emergency preparedness by some heavy industry is placing volunteers at risk because of the level of hazard. Can you provide a comment on that?

Mr Price: Yes, in some ways it has, and that comes back to the level and the amount of training. Industry is obviously a big part of the role we play - we provide a service for industry as well. There needs to be certain pressure on industry to make sure they have their own services in place. More to the point, it takes the pressure off the volunteers. The more industry there is, the more trained volunteers there will be and the more time they have to provide. Industry is predominantly a risky game. When you have an incident tied up with industry, it can be quite dangerous putting volunteers in there. There needs to be a lot of pressure put on industry to make sure that they have their systems in place. We support the fire and rescue service. They have the expertise and the training; we have a basic knowledge.

Mr S.R. HILL: Is your local brigade's relationship with industry good?

Mr Price: We have quite a good relationship, especially with BHP. We have a fire service manager who is a joint BHP-fire and rescue officer, so there is quite good interaction between the companies. We generally deal with and train industry around town. We have had a few exercises with BP and their fuel trucks etc. Industry has slowly been coming on board, recognising that they need to start putting things in place. There are still issues that need addressing but we are heading in the right direction. Industry is starting to wake up and starting to commit services and resources to provide the facilities for looking after their own interests.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Is your brigade satisfied with the level of support training that it receives from FESA?

Mr Price: It is getting better. We are all volunteers and we put in a lot of hours. If we were paid, it would cost the government a lot of money. Just lately they are really coming on board as far as

putting a training package together. It is getting a lot better, but for us here in town, the South Hedland brigade, for example, deals with up to 300 calls a year. This is higher than some of the metropolitan areas and we are all volunteers. Then you have Port Hedland; I would guess they would get over a hundred calls a year. When you put that into a scale of X amount of volunteers, a lot of hours are put in. At some point FESA really needs to take a look at that and say, "Well look, we need to put permanent people, or a skeleton crew, or some permanent people in town to carry some of that load." That will take the pressure off the volunteers a little bit. There is more and more pressure being put on them.

Mr S.R. HILL: There has been some criticism identified to the committee that there is training offered and then two weeks out, for example, it is cancelled.

Mr Price: Due to what?

Mr S.R. HILL: It could be numbers or it could be a change in personnel at a district level, for example.

Mr Price: Yes.

Mr S.R. HILL: Some of the volunteer brigades are saying that there should be a twelve-month program so then your people could say, "Well look, I can slot in for this training exercise here, or I could do it later towards the end of the year."

Mr Price: That is being put together as we speak. I have not seen a final copy of that, but they have put together a 12-month plan.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: FESA?

Mr Price: Yes, FESA has put together a plan. I have not had a lot of input on that. We had a quick look at it. That is yet to come back to us to see the final copy. That works well; however, you can set a calendar up, but you still need flexibility. You are dealing with volunteers, so you must have a lot of flexibility in there. You can put down a structure and say that we are going to provide X amount of training this year, and it is up to the brigade to try and fit it in to this calendar where they can. As we speak, that is being done. It sounds pretty good. Hopefully it will be as good as what they say it is going to be. My comments on the calendar that they have brought out are open at the moment until I have seen the final copy, then I will make comment on it.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: It is a transient population here and you talked about your active membership. Are you having trouble retaining or even recruiting members as a group?

Mr Price: Definitely. That is always an issue here. A couple of years ago with the closure of HBI we lost a number of qualified members, plain members. Port Hedland is a transient town, as a lot of mining towns are. It makes it very hard to keep your training level up because it really takes a number of years to get people to a certain level. You can put a person through all the basic training in 12 months and then experience will obviously build on that through a number of years with the service. Being a transient town you have people here for two, three or four years. You get them to a level where they are pretty good and they move on. That is very common here. It is really hard. There is no easy answer to that. All that can be done is to provide more training so that we can try and get that training done probably in a - not a shorter period but maybe 12 months or six months. In general, talking to all the agencies, getting volunteers is getting hard. I think that comes back to people putting a high value on their life. Also, the responsibility put on volunteers these days is getting out of control at the moment. I feel that the way we are heading, it gets too much, it really does. We have run a few advertising campaigns in town trying to get people, through the radio and the paper and things like that. From FESA's perspective, ads on TV and things like that will be a good push, but this is where they push FESA and its emergency services; it is covering all of them. People look at that and most people target one area; they want to get into the SES, they want to get into the sea search and rescue, or they want to get into the fire and rescue. I think those areas need to be highlighted, and then people can target them rather than just being an emergency service

officer, or with one of those services. Generally, my experience with it is that people are down one line. They do not want to be involved in three or four. Some people do, but the majority of people want to be a fireman, or with the SES, or with sea search and rescue or whatever. Some sort of advertising campaign that targets each one of those areas would be more beneficial than having a broad advertising campaign for volunteers.

Mr S.R. HILL: Vaughan, if you were in charge of FESA or emergency services in WA, what would some of your thoughts be to improve emergency services in Western Australia?

Mr Price: Take the pressure off the volunteers would be the first thing I would do. The volunteers are there, not just to provide a service, but to have fun. You have to make it enjoyable for them. The biggest thing is their response to the pressure, probably more so in the last couple of years. It has gone from "I am just a volunteer", especially with the introduction of the ESL. There is a huge public image to uphold, which is fair enough, you expect that, but at the same time there is a lot of money coming in from across the state, and it should be put back into putting permanent people or responsible people into a lot of these regional locations to carry some of that workload and responsibility.

[10.40 am]

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Vaughan, do you want to expand on that in terms of putting, and resourcing, FESA staff here? I understand there are four permanent FESA staff here.

Mr Price: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How many people do you think this area would require?

Mr Price: We have got only one. The other three are out with the SES. They are available to us. We do not necessarily use them a lot. We have a fire service manager whom we deal with day to day. It eliminates a lot of things. When you look at a brigade that has X amount of workload, then you obviously need to build a scale so that once you get to a certain workload, or industry is involved, there is a permanent person in that service who carries all the load of all the administrative side. That means that the volunteers can do their job and put wet stuff on hot stuff and come back to the station and have a debrief, but someone else can do the paperwork and the volunteers can go back to work or back to bed, or wherever they go. When you go to a job, a huge amount of responsibility is associated with the training, whereas if you have a permanent person who is professional in that area, the level of training does not need to be as great. That means that over the 12 months of training we might be able to limit that and not have such intense training for people, because although our volunteers have a job to do, we have a leader there who is a professional and does it for a career, as a career firefighter does. We will always have the responsibility, but they are the professionals, and we can bounce everything off them and walk away, without the pressure of having to think what should we do here and what should we do there. It means we can bring in new people with basic experience, but they have a professional standing next to them saying "Do this" or "Do that". We can go to a call now with two or three new people. They have the qualifications to do the job, but they do not have the experience, or they may not go to a job for a couple of months, and they say "How do I do this?" or "What do I do there?" It is daunting. They then get to the point of saying "What am I doing here; it is not fun anymore; there is too much responsibility."

Mr S.R. HILL: Too structured.

Mr Price: Yes. I really feel that the responsibilities and the workload and the training are great. The training needs to be there, but the level of training -

Mr S.R. HILL: So to compensate for something like that, should the Australian or even the state government look at providing some sort of tax relief for volunteers?

Mr Price: Yes.

Mr S.R. HILL: You do not want to pay them an incentive, but should they be provided with some sort of relief if they are coming forward and driving 20 kilometres to get to your shed to train?

Mr Price: There is a pretty strong feeling in our brigade about the ESL. Some of them have a couple of properties. They are really struggling. They put in a lot of hours. There has been a lot of rejection to that. I know just from talking to our association that right across the state there is a lot of rejection to the ESL and not having any breaks for the volunteers. It is a hard one. Probably something needs to be looked at along those lines.

Mr S.R. HILL: Say, for example, when you put in your tax return at the end of the year you can identify that you have worked for 30 hours with a volunteer group. The federal government is trying to look at some sort of mechanism to acknowledge the importance of volunteers. Would that help with some of the recruitment? Obviously you do not want it to be too structured. You have said you want it to be enjoyable - a family sort of grouping of people.

Mr Price: Yes, it would, but it would have to be managed in such a way that we do not encourage the wrong people to get involved, if you know what I mean, because that has adverse effects. Yes, that is something that needs to be done, but it is very hard to manage.

Mr S.R. HILL: Yes, because you might attract certain individuals who want a benefit but say they will come to one training session but they will not be coming again for another four months, or something -

Mr Price: Yes, because they get some tax relief. I agree that there needs to be some tax relief, but it needs to be structured in such a way that it is fair. Everyone has to be looked at on their own merits. You only need to look at the hours. I know the hours that I and some of my senior members have put in. We have been putting 15-plus hours a week into a voluntary service. That is not just our service; it is all services across the country. When you look at it in that way, that would be a benefit. I suppose we have to look at whether we should pay people a retainer, as they do over east. However, people would then not be cast as volunteers, and, again, we might attract the wrong people. At the moment we have people who want to be there; they are keen to provide a service. We do not want to lose that. It would be great to have some tax relief, but it is needs to be structured in such a way that it can be managed.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Would you like to make any other comments or provide the committee with any further information?

Mr Price: No, not at this stage.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of your evidence will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced, and the sense of the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 10.46 am
